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BOOK AND MEDIA REVIEW

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A Review of *Get Out:* On White Terror and the Black Body

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***Get Out*.** Jordan Peele (Director). Jason Blum, Edward Hamm, Jr., Sean McKittrick, and Jordan Peele (Producers). United States: Universal Pictures (2017). 103 minutes.

ABSTRACT

This essay provides a review of Jordan Peele's film, *Get Out*. The author argues that Peele's *Get Out* illustrates the protracted terrorism that is whiteness and the concomitant objectification and utilization of the black body for white survival, accumulation, and pleasure. The film challenges those in education to consider how anti-blackness operates within schools and education policy. More specifically, those in education should challenge longstanding inequities that foreclose the presents and futures of black youth.

Jordan Peele's 2017 blockbuster hit film *Get Out* has grossed nearly $230 million dollars in box office revenues becoming one of the year's most discussed, celebrated, and lucrative films. Peele's work is set to engender a broadening of the "horror" genre to that which has a specifically articulated niche—race relations. Peele's *Get Out* was able to conjure in digestible, if not wholly acceptable, increments the racial tensions, anxieties, and animus that has long beset the United States, but whose salience seems necessarily renewed in the era of Black Lives Matter and in the wake of the election of Donald Trump, who was supported by various neo-Nazi organizations and the Ku Klux Klan. Indeed, this film comes as the United States is experiencing the aftershocks of electing its first black president, Barack Obama, and the perpetual pattern of white resentment with black mobility, governance, and determination—even, and perhaps especially, if it is within the halls of government. One need only to consider the Reconstruction Era and the retrenchment of rights soon after, crystalizing in the Jim and Jane Crow Era, for an example (DuBois, 1935/1998).

As such, Peele's film is an important text for unpacking the operative functions of race, white supremacy, and dominance in the United States. While this film, like any text, is partial with omissions and limitations, it has the potential to lay bare the seduction of white liberalism that is disconnected from a project of eliminating whiteness. More specifically, I argue here that Peele's *Get Out* illustrates the protracted terrorism that is whiteness and the concomitant objectification and utilization of the black body for survival, accumulation, and pleasure. That is to say, whiteness—a socially constructed, yet materially manifested ideology, practice, and positionality—operates to secure its symbolic and structural advantage, its dominance, by devaluing, debasing, and dispossessing that which is constituted as black. In so doing, whiteness operates as terror and harbinger of suffering, possessive in intent and often deadly in impact, believing itself to have, as sociologist W.E.B. DuBois (1920/1999) has noted, "ownership of the earth forever and ever" (p.18) (see also Dumas, 2014; Hooks, 1997; Lipsitz, 1998).

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Overview of film

Get Out, set in the present day United States, tells the story of Chris (Daniel Kaluuya), a talented, young black photographer who is in an interracial relationship with Rose (Allison Williams), a seemingly supportive and "social justice" orientated white woman (e.g., she defends Chris and admonishes a white police officer who harasses Chris). They are to embark on a trip to visit Rose's parents, an esteemed neurosurgeon, Dean (Bradley Whitford) and Missy (Catherine Keener), a psychologist who specializes in hypnosis. Chris, familiar with the tensions of interracial dating and white disgust, asks Rose if her parents would have any issue with their dating. Rose attempts to assuage Chris' apprehensions and affirms her parents' civility and commitment to diversity and equality, evening mentioning her father's support of former President Barack Obama. When they arrive to the family's home, Chris is met with a series of disconcerting comments and interactions that can initially be chalked up to awkwardness and perhaps liberal exoticism of racial difference. In fewer words, microaggressions. Yet behind these encounters lies a far more serious foreshadowing clue about the racio-capitalist project that is underway—the commodification of the black body.

During Chris' visit he is hypnotized by Missy, who like her husband is repulsed by Chris' smoking. Under this hypnosis, he not only develops a distaste for smoking, which can symbolize a loss of his agency/desire and it being replaced with the desires of Whites, but also enters "the sunken place." "The sunken place" is a dislodging of the mind from the body. The mind is suspended in a "waste land" and the body becomes privy to the control of Whites. As the film progresses, a soirée is held where the almost exclusively white friends of Dean and Missy gather. Commotion ensues after Chris snaps a picture of a black man, Andrew (Lakeith Stanfield), who the audience realizes was abducted in the opening scene of the movie. Chris is told to "get out!" by Andrew, as the flash of the camera temporary allows for control of one's body and mind. Upset by the occurrence, Chris and Rose take a walk in the woods, as the guests engage in what is tantamount to a silent slave auction, where they bid on Chris. Upon returning home, Chris is transported into the sunken place and prepped for a lobotomy. His body will be controlled by a white (color)blind man, who purchased him. By sheer subversive will, Chris is able to thwart the hypnosis and lobotomy by stuffing his ears with cotton. He no longer listens to what white people say. He ultimately kills all of the people in Rose's family, including Rose, who we realize is complicit in the entire affair. Chris is rescued by his best friend, Rod (Milton 'Lil Rel' Howery), a Transportation Security Administration (TSA) agent, who throughout the film has been a voice of reason, desperately trying to alert all about his friend's kidnapping. The irony of Rod's character resides in the fact that TSA is constructed in the white US imaginary as a necessary arbiter against "radical Islamic terrorism." In the case of *Get Out*, the endarkened other is no longer the terrorist, but rather hero and protagonist.

White terror and black bodies

Get Out makes clear that the real terrorism that threatens most US citizens is homegrown, normalized, and enlivened by white dominance and supremacy. This film succinctly illustrates that for black people to survive, whiteness must die (Matias & Allen, 2013; Roediger, 1994). There is no redemption in or for whiteness. Whiteness' reproductive terroristic power is secured by its parasitic appetite for blackness (Henry, 2016). This white terror situates black bodies and life as fungible and privy to and property of white possession. Anthony Paul Farley (1997) reminds us that, "whiteness is a sadistic pleasure and that the black body is a fetish object …" for white accumulation (p. 461). In possessing black bodies, understood as objects, contemporary formations of power are animated and the materiality of racial oppression is made manifest, as in periods prior. For instance, the line of demarcation between slavery and "post-slavery" is collapsed in this film with the abducting, selling, and using of black bodies. The past *is* present. As such, the house of liberalism folds when its façade of colorblindness and post-racialism cannot bare the realities of its fabrication.

In many ways, black students across the United States, experience how this whiteness works, finding themselves in the "sunken place" of schools, suspended in time. Schools as locations of enclosure that offer culturally irrelevant curriculum and pedagogies, suspensions and expulsions, and disgust effectively

confine our youth, rendering them avatars for white dominance, profit, survival, and pleasure. Rooted in hegemonic notions of education, schools often aim to produce the "perfect kind" of black student, one who is hypnotized by the prevailing educational enchantment. Similar to Chris, social justice education requires resistance from our youth—to denounce whiteness and white supremacy and to work in the interests of freedom. Yet, as in *Get Out*, far too often are our youth silenced and rendered objects to be worked upon. Their humanity is seen as superfluous in neoliberal audit cultures more concerned with test scores and charter expansion, than authentic learning and emancipation.

Ultimately, *Get Out* has the potential to open dialogue about the nature of anti-blackness and white supremacy in the United States. Liberal/progressive white educators, generally, and white women educators, specifically, who are committed to confronting issues of social injustice in schools must glean from the film how their positionality must be problematized, as they too can reinscribe white dominance and terror, as the film suggests. We in education are left to grapple with how the dispossession of Blacks operates in our schools; how Whites may willingly or unwillingly, but nevertheless do, lead our children into traps where they must fight for their lives; and how we all must necessarily wage a war on white terror. However arduous it may be, we must *get out*.

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